

Rituals in Conflict Resolution: A Helpful Tool or a New Turn?

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Abstract

While the essay will be mostly concentrated on the role of rituals in resolution of conflicts and promoting negotiations and the impact ritual theory can have on conflict resolution as a discipline, it will also try to address these general questions on substantial issues of conflict resolution development. The essay defends that the study of rituals can substantially deepen the understanding of conflict and conflict resolution in world politics. Therefore, the paper argues that the body of ritual helps to uncover practical ways of tackling the contradiction between universalism and relativism in conflict settlement/transformation. As a unique tool of social order restoration, ritual studies open a new perspective on conflict resolution and, in accordance with a deep conviction of an author? Which one?, give an opportunity to address the critic posed towards conflict resolution as a discipline.

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Relevant Debates on Conflict Resolutions

Heated debates on contemporary conflict resolution² as a discipline are connected with tensions between conflict settlement and conflict transformation, communitarian and universalistic ideas as well as the ones between cultural relativism and human universalism (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall, 2011). In this respect, the main problem lies in ontological and epistemological roots of conflict resolution. As Polly Walker puts it: “The discipline of conflict resolution perpetuates ontological violence, the suppression and silencing of Indigenous ways of conceptualizing and experiencing the world.” (2004) The issue of interpreting conflict resolution as a western-centred discipline is still a highly controversial topic. From one perspective, a human nature can be considered as universal in its predisposition to conflict and in its need to have a certain level of safety, so that it is understandable why there should be some common mechanisms for achieving the progress towards the establishment of peaceful and safe life-world in different societies. At the same time, another approach to this issue considers that conflict resolution covers wide range of conflicts worldwide and addresses conflicts to promote peace working within remarkable number of cultural settings. Obviously, an involvement into various cultural situations provokes changes and developments in conflict resolution, so that it is hardly possible to agree the discipline is entirely

Western-minded.

Understanding this problem the author brings attention to the fact that the main matter in here is that conflict resolution is developed within Western schools of social sciences and is based on the practice of international institutions built by Western countries. This leads to a situation when conflicts are intentionally or subconsciously handled in the way that should be understandable for Western system of power relations and structures. At the same time, Western countries do what they can do – the actions they undertake represent the logic that lies upon Western model(s) of states, institutions as well as traditions of resolving conflicts.

After Briefly outlining the differences between Western and non-Western perceptions of conflict resolution it is important to mention few points. As Abu-Nimer puts it, the Western model of conflict resolution is characterised by a direct method of interaction and communication focused on tangible interests (1996: page). Even though conflict resolution as a field of activity and a discipline was modified after the condemnations in simplifying conflict resolution to certain steps and measures, in Western approaches the generic belief in rationalised practises is still quite remarkable. At the same time, in other cultural settings conflict can be seen not from a perspective of the utilitarian need to solve it, but as a constant change of social order, as a natural phenomenon that exists as a part of just order, as a performance, etc. Therefore, The main idea of the article in itself is a proposition to approach contradictions between Western and non-Western perceptions of conflict resolution from the perspective of ritual theory. The

² Being aware about the debates surrounding the concept of ‘conflict resolution’, here and after in the paper the notions ‘conflict transformation’, ‘conflict settlement’ and ‘conflict resolution’ are predominantly used interchangeably.

rationale that lies behind it is that it helps both (1) to illustrate alternative approaches to conflict resolution and (2) to show how understanding of rituals in terms of conflict resolution can help to integrate different views on conflict and conflict resolution.

Ritual studies as a way to address problem

In modern social sciences, definitions of ritual are so diverse that there is hardly a way to summarise all the approaches. This created a situation when contemporary researchers simply resign from the idea of catching the essence of ritual (Bell 2009, 138-169; Huesken and Neubert 2011). In frames of the essay, the main attention is dedicated to functionalists and structuralists approach towards rituals avoiding the implications made by scholars of Cambridge myth and ritual school in order to generalise the developments of ritual theory that are applicable in field of conflict resolution.

It is worth noting that the concept of ritual itself appeared in social sciences in the end of the XIX century, even though its etymology has a long history and is derived from Latin "ritus". Adopting a functionalists perspective on ritual Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* pointed out integrative characteristics of rituals such as an ability to bring people together, to remind them of their commonality and their past, to give them a feeling of belonging to the society and to discipline them. For Durkheim, rituals constitute a cognitive means of interpreting the social world, rendering it intelligible by organizing people's knowledge of the past and present and their capacity to imagine the future.

Arnold van Gennep, in his work *Rites of Passage*, rituals as practices symbolize the

change of different periods in personal or social life (life-crisis rituals) (2004). Among the biggest developments of van Gennep's theory is the outline of ritual process' stages according to which ritual phases include separation, transition and incorporation (Van Gennep, 2004, 11). An anthropologist Victor Turner develops on this creating a comprehensive structuralist perspective on rituals (1969). In his early works he describes how rituals create structure and anti-structure through separation, liminality, and reincorporation (idem: 94-131) while later he emphasises the dynamic dimension of ritual telling that it is "a world in becoming, not a world in being" (Turner, 1974, 24).

A communicative approach in the ritual theory applied by Clifford Geertz presents ritual as a special language which creates its own symbols and helps communities to communicate empowering their own cultural codes (2000). Such an interpretation of ritual broadens our perception of intercultural communication and ways to bring up compromise in conflict situations.

While rituals definitely play an integrative role in the society, as it was shown by researchers mentioned above, they also may provide an arena for conflicting groups to consolidate against others. Peter Winn makes an important point in this respect: the impact of ritual, according to Winn, depends on the definition of the ritual action itself and not on the intensions of participants (1996, 552-553). This makes ritualistic practices safer because of their traditional roots. Indeed, ritual prescribes participants certain roles and prescribes their behaviours. In this sense, ritual creates a dramatic performance the outcome of which is presupposed from the beginning. Using the words of Peter Winn, ritual is "characterised by standardized, repetitive interpersonal symbolic actions patterned according to social customs, which involve

constant form over time, and which influence or orient human affairs” (Winn, 1996, 553). While such perspective on rituals gives us a clear basis for distinguishing rituals from other actions in terms of conflict, it also creates an unwarranted impression that ritual is doomed to success. The later supposition is supported by one more group of ritual theorists. If previously mentioned researchers of ritual interpret this phenomena taking into account its meaningful nature, Frist Staal in *Rules Without Meaning. Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* points out that the main characteristic of rituals is that it has “no meaning, goal or aim” (Staal, 1993, 131). This researcher considers that rituals are connected with symbolic value in Western writings just because Western thought comes from Christian tradition of understanding sacred ritual as a symbolic act. As a consequence of such state of things meaning? becomes a substitute for religion. “In ritual activity, the activity itself is all that counts,” - mentions the author (Staal, 1993, 133). Staal derives these conclusions from his assumption that the result of the ritual is well known even before the start of the ritual. In practice, when used in conflict resolution, rituals prove the opposite as it is argued by the scientists researching on the grassroots functioning of ritual in conflict. Stemming from field studies in conflict zones provided by Sharon Lang, Carolyn Nordstrom, Doron Pely, Lisa Schirch and other scholars, it becomes evident that ritual gives certain frames to resolve conflict on different stages. Ritualistic practises address different types of conflicts and they can be involved on the stage of negotiations, as well as after the visible conflict is over. Nevertheless, rituals only frame people’s behaviours and emotions reflecting beliefs and structures functioning in the society. It

does not guarantee that after its empowerment conflict will be resolved, but it empowers traditional methods to bring people together and create a new social reality.

Taking into account previously mentioned influence of rituals on conflict resolution, the need for rituals in this field is related to the fact it is seen by conflict parties as a natural way to solve problems, so that it gives additional legitimacy to new developments on the way to ascertainable peace. The framework given by the ritual is not rationally built, but culturally inherited and this creates its own variations on the way to re-establishing social order.

After the outline of theoretical basis of the study of rituals the article resorts to practical examples that were traced in the field of conflict resolution. It is important to note that in current publications discovering the role of ritual in conflicts there is a tendency to see rituals as appropriate tools for reconciliation of conflict after the stage of negotiations is over and the war itself is already solved. While such approach gives an opportunity to see a clear application of the theory of ritual developed by structuralist Turner, most probably the most popular theory among scholars in the field, it does not cover the whole variety of rituals’ application conflict resolution. ???Article proposes to illustrate the role of ritual in conflict resolution with two examples – the case of Mozambique cleansing rituals and the Palestinian negotiations ritual (sulha). – the abstract doesn’t make any reference to the case studies. In the abstract or in the introduction, you should explain better your argument and how you develop it.

Mozambique: healing the wounds of war. In her book *Another Kind of War Story* Carolyn

Nordstrom uncovers anthropological dimensions of war telling about ways how people deal with conflicts in Mozambique and how normal life is brought to people's interactions after the war period has ended (Nordstrom, 1997).

The case of Mozambique can be seen as an appropriate illustration to Victor Turner's theory of ritual. Rituals give Mozambican people an opportunity to create a separate reality which goes far beyond material concerns of everyday life. According to the belief of tribes living on territories of Mozambique, spirits of the dead live together with the community, so that they can help and influence lives of people. This creates a situation when after years and years of war when soldiers return home it is supposed they are highly dangerous for the family as they carry the responsibility for actions undertaken during war period. It is thought that spirits of killed people can damage ex-soldiers lives as well as lives of their family members. However this can seem ridiculous for Western people, it is hard not to trace an objective side of such concerns: in Western societies the aftermath of war is also a problem for soldiers involved in armed actions and it creates well-known pressures on ex-soldiers so that it makes cases of successful return to their "normal" life without additional therapy is almost impossible. While in Western societies the reaction towards such situation is to go to the specialist and to talk about problems trying to overcome them through reflection, in other traditions there is a communal approach towards salvation of this problem. In Mozambique, they refer to traditional ritual where person is healed by special procedures made by a spirit medium or by the oldest and the most respected family member. This person usually gives to the ex-soldier some tea made of special herbs and washes away his guilt in a river

(Davidheiser, 2006). Only after the ritual is over, ex-soldier can return to the family and communicate with other people without any danger. Unmaking violence, according to Carolyn Nordstrom, is "not a citizen's option, but a social obligation" (Nordstrom, 1998, 116). Such rituals propose an alternative framework to oppose the violence with the usage of collective knowledge and traditions (Nordstrom & Martin, 1992). Such practices correspond to the structure of the society and help people to overcome the conflict because they are integrated to the people's worldview.

Palestine: establishing negotiations. Informal negotiations in the Middle East tradition of conflict resolution called *sulha* provide factual support to the communicative theory of ritual. *Sulha* is used for settlement of different levels and types of conflicts creating basic preconditions for negotiations on a wide variety of issues. The main function of this ritual is to bring conflicting parties together through a set of actions taking a communal approach linking psychological and political dimensions of conflict resolution (Pely, 2008). However, the process of *sulha* seems to be a simplified model of behaviour which gives parties pre-prepared roles, in fact it is much more complicated.

The success of the ritual is not guaranteed by the start of the negotiations. The first step is made when the *Sulha* Committee composed of respected men among the community-members. The second step includes a set of actions which each party has to perform in order to start *sulha* process. Practically, it resembles a theatre where parties are forced to start moving towards a compromise by traditions. After this phase of *sulha* is over, the *Sulha* Committee during disputes discusses what additional mechanisms should be used to

keep the safety during the ritual process. After that the main negotiations are carried within the Committee which cooperates with all parties of the conflict and finally has to decide on a decision that has to be imposed. Parties do respect the decision of the Sulha Committee and follow it because, in case they do not, they will lose respect towards them within the community. Sulha ritual proves that, carefully used, rituals can allow to restore honour and dignity of parties participating in conflict while provoking reconciliation in the wider community (Gellman & Vuinovich, 2008).

If to compare, the main difference between indigenous ritual practices in conflict resolution and Western models of negotiations is that, in case of rituals, the whole procedure corresponds to the structure of the society and answers more complex set of relations between parties. Western models of negotiations, on the contrary, are aimed to give set 'roles' to all the parties of the conflict adopting a generalised scheme of conflict resolution on each particular case without taking into account cultural differences. The main conclusion from both examples of ritual application in conflict resolution mentioned can be that culture is crucial for renewing mutual understanding, and ensuring the basic human right to dignity in and after conflicts. This implies that potentially ritual can become an efficient component of conflict resolution executed by third parties.

Implications for Conflict Resolution

The question addressed by the essay is how ritual theory can change conflict resolution giving a comprehensive reply to critics posed

by main philosophical schools, namely critical theory (Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, Mandy Turner) and post-structural theory (Mark Hoffman, Oliver Richmond) (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall 2011, 35-62, 396-413).

Western ontology and epistemology are different from non-Western and there is no need for conflict resolution to search for the way out of this situation by finding common values and building unified ontological and epistemological frame that would allow different cultural practices to be employed. To a certain extent, this question was arisen by Carolyn Nordstrom: "Talking about creativity and imagination is not easy within the confines of Western epistemology. ... The actual processes of the creation of self and world are poorly understood" (Nordstrom 1998, 110). The key solution can be to broaden the frames of conflict resolution as a discipline and to enrich it with analysis of practices used for the settlement of conflicts in different historical periods applied in various civilisations. There is a huge entirety of knowledge about conflict resolution in this perspective that is currently used only within other disciplines. The author argues that there is a rationale standing behind a creation of a special research field focusing on this sort of questions within conflict resolution as a discipline.

As illustrated by the ritual theory, there is a need to study phenomena existing in conflict resolution in different countries, nations, ethnic groups, etc. which are mainly approached by researchers from other disciplines within conflict resolution. Currently, conflict resolution is lacking systemic (re)examination of knowledge existing in other sciences from the perspective of its applicability in contemporary theory and practice of

conflict resolution. As it was traced on the example of ritual theory, studies of rituals are not represented in conflict resolution on a sufficient level. Practically, the massive knowledge gathered by theorists of ritual is not integrated into conflict resolution. This results in a lack of comprehensive theory of conflict resolution which would address critique in searching for 'universal panaceas' or 'universalising assumptions'.

Conclusions

The article explored the main theories of rituals in their connection to the conflict resolution. Discovering the applicability of those theories, the article provided examples of rituals' usage in world politics. The conclusions drawn from this have provided the evidence that rituals should be seen by theorists and practitioners of conflict resolution not only as existing on a level of conflict reconciliation, but implicitly present on different stages of conflict transformation. The power of ritual in conflict resolution is seen in the essay as depending on its ability to create, order and structure human social institutions. Moreover, in a broader sense, ritual is always dealing with social order and social relations, so that it is highly important to study rituals from the perspective of conflict resolution, especially in non-Western societies where they have more evident influence on social structures and disputes.

Moving towards a more generic conclusion, the essay has shown that the theory of ritual can influence the perspectives of understanding conflict resolution as a discipline. With certain limitations it can help this field to address serious critics from the side of critical and post-structuralists' theory. The main challenges conflict resolution is currently facing as a discipline can be addressed by the understanding of

rituals as culturally inherited ways of settlement/transformation of conflicts.

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